

## **HISTORY OF THE NAVY OPHTHALMIC PROGRAM**

Adequate vision has always been recognized as an essential requirement for military service. The stringent physical standards which existed prior to World War II precluded the enlistment or commissioning of candidates with reduced visual acuity. Personnel who required prescription eyewear were obligated to obtain it at their own expense. The rapid mobilization which followed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor necessitated the lowering of visual standards in order to man the expanding fleets and shore establishment.

Lacking an ophthalmic program, the Navy entered into contractual agreements to satisfy the critical need for prescription eyewear. When the civilian laboratories were unable to meet the demand, a military ophthalmic program was established by the Navy Appropriation Act of 1942 which authorized funds for the issuance of prescription eyewear to Navy and Marine Corps personnel serving abroad. Base optical units with the capability of fabricating a limited range of prescriptions were established and truck-mounted optical units stocked with pre-finished eyewear serviced forward areas. In 1943 the mobile units were modified by the addition of lens edging equipment; however, the lack of lens surfacing capability limited their effectiveness.

A program to provide prescription eyewear for all Navy personnel was introduced in 1945. Sixty-five spectacle dispensing units were established within the United States to order and fit the eyewear which was being fabricated under contracts with civilian laboratories. A five week program at the U. S. Naval Medical Supply Depot, Brooklyn, New York, trained the spectacle dispensers to staff these units.

Rapid demobilization following the end of World War II resulted in an acute shortage of trained personnel and necessitated the establishment of an Optical School at the U.S. Naval Medical Supply Depot, Brooklyn, New York, in June 1945 with courses for opticians and dispensers. Contract procurement of prescription eyewear was discontinued in 1945 and the program remained unaltered during the post war phase down until 1 July 1949 when Navy ophthalmic laboratories with surfacing capabilities were established at the Navy Medical Supply Depot, Brooklyn, New York, and the Navy Supply Center, Oakland, California. Four continental ophthalmic service units were commissioned to fabricate prescriptions from finished uncut single vision lenses and eight overseas single vision units were modernized. Spectacle dispensing units were designated at thirty-five stateside Navy medical facilities.

The Optical School was relocated to the Naval Medical School, National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Maryland, and redesignated the Optometric

Fabrication School. The Brooklyn laboratory was moved to the Naval Supply Center, Edgewater, New Jersey, in 1950 where it remained until 1954 when it was redesignated the Naval Ophthalmic Lens Laboratory and relocated to the Naval Supply Center, Cheatham Annex, Williamsburg, Virginia. The Naval Ophthalmic Lens Laboratory, Oakland, California was disestablished on 1 July 1958.

Expansion of ophthalmic support services coupled with new specialty prescription eyewear programs significantly increased demand and necessitated several additions to the Cheatham Annex facility. This change in mission resulted in the activity being redesignated as the Naval Ophthalmic Support Activity on 1 July 1964.

Relocation of the training program from Bethesda to Williamsburg was approved by the Surgeon General and the activity was granted command status as the Naval Ophthalmic Support and Training Activity on 6 May 1968. To maintain operational commitments and comply with new Food and Drug Administration regulations, the Command initiated actions which resulted in the authorization of Urgent Minor Construction funding to replace the old complex and relocate the activity to the Naval Weapons Station, Yorktown, Virginia. Following extensive planning, ground was broken in February 1971 and a new 10,500 square foot facility was dedicated on 12 January 1973. A second phase of Military Construction added 15,000 square feet in administrative offices, an environmentally controlled warehouse and academic spaces for the Optician Technician School, enabling the Command to complete its relocation in May 1974.

Department of Defense realignment of operational responsibilities created a Tri-Service Ophthalmic Services Program on 1 October 1978. Key elements in this regionalized approach to the worldwide delivery of ophthalmic support services were the Naval Ophthalmic Support and Training Activity, the Fitzsimons Optical Fabrication Laboratory in Aurora, Colorado, and twelve (12) regional single vision activities.

Historically NOSTRA has provided approximately 30,000 pair per month of all types of prescription eyewear for active duty of the uniformed services, and for other authorized personnel as prescribed by Title 10, U. S. Code and current directives. During Operation Desert Shield/Storm NOSTRA met unprecedented demands for production. From August 1990 through March 1991 the nation's rapid mobilization and deployment resulted in an 87.9% increase in spectacle demands. During this period, 431,077 pairs of glasses were fabricated, of which 185,699 were immediate operational requests that were made and shipped in less than forty-eight hours. This high productivity was accomplished by teamwork and working twelve hour days, six days per week. Another

milestone was the production record for the month of January 1991 when 75,122 jobs were fabricated and shipped, the highest total in NOSTRA history. The month of December 1990 was also impressive with production of 72,808, the second highest monthly total.

During this period of unprecedented demands, the laboratory also completed a move into a new 16,000 square foot addition to the building, which had been under construction since in 1989.

The Navy's Class "C" School training program in opticianry, also located at NOSTRA, consists of an intensive six month course of instruction with successful students certifying as Navy opticians (HM-8463). The program is recognized by the National Academy of Opticianry and students receive full credit toward an associate degree within the Virginia Community College System. In 1991 the National Optician's Accreditation Association conferred full accreditation for both the Laboratory Technician and the Dispensing Technician programs, the first optician school in the nation to have both programs fully accredited. In November 1995, all Department of Defense training for opticians was consolidated at NOSTRA, as U. S. Army students and instructors joined the staff.

In October 1996, NOSTRA's mission was expanded again. With the closure of the Army Optical Fabrication Laboratory at Fitzsimons, NOSTRA was assigned the task of providing multifocal eyewear to DoD personnel worldwide. With this expansion, NOSTRA became a joint production lab with 27 Army opticians augmenting the 80 Navy optician production staff. During the same period, the Navy Surgeon General authorized the Frame of Choice Program. This very popular Quality of Life Program was soon adopted by the Army and Air Force.

In October 1999, NOSTRA was designated as the Executive Agent for Department of Defense Optical Fabrication charged with the fiscal oversight of all DoD optical fabrication labs, worldwide. In February 2000, NOSTRA spearheaded the implementation of the Frame of Choice Program for the Army and Air Force.

Recognized as a leader in ophthalmic fabrication innovation, NOSTRA has teamed with the Naval Facility Command's Ergonomics Team to implement several ergonomic improvements throughout the Command. Dedicated in June 2000, these improvements make NOSTRA a safer, more efficient and comfortable workplace.

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